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Abstract

This excerpt from the last part of a short novel by Mahasweta Devi is concerned with Molina Mishra's sense of self-betrayal, faced as she is with her failure to lead a meaningful life. A middle class Bengali, a Hindu widow, an old woman of 70, she has seemed to family and friends an exemplary figure. She has lived a life of utmost simplicity, even austerity, denying herself the comforts now common among India's urban middle class while enabling her three daughters to be well educated and well married. She has spent her resources on a school for girls, and on helping abandoned and destitute women. Above all, she has remained faithful to the memory of her husband, Bejoy Mishra, a revolutionary communist of the 1930s who died a long ago as 1940 while she was still only 22. She could have remarried as there were men who loved her and her father would have had no objection. Yet she refused their offers, endured the loneliness and difficulties of life, remaining loyal to old communists who did not change their views or lifestyles amid the new politics of post-independent India.

MAHASWETA DEVI

From *Sati*

COMMENTARY AND TRANSLATION FROM BENGALI BY RANJANA ASH

This excerpt from the last part of a short novel by Mahasweta Devi is concerned with Molina Mishra's sense of self-betrayal, faced as she is with her failure to lead a meaningful life. A middle class Bengali, a Hindu widow, an old woman of 70, she has seemed to family and friends an exemplary figure. She has lived a life of utmost simplicity, even austerity, denying herself the comforts now common among India's urban middle class while enabling her three daughters to be well educated and well married. She has spent her resources on a school for girls, and on helping abandoned and destitute women. Above all, she has remained faithful to the memory of her husband, Bejoy Mishra, a revolutionary communist of the 1930s who died as long ago as 1940 while she was still only 22. She could have remarried as there were men who loved her and her father would have had no objection. Yet she refused their offers, endured the loneliness and difficulties of life, remaining loyal to old communists who did not change their views or lifestyles amid the new politics of post-independent India. Her life, as seen by others and herself therefore, is that of a *sati*, that idealized image of the chaste wife who tries to uphold the kind of devotion shown by the mythic goddess, Sati, who was prepared to immolate herself by fire when her husband, the great god Shiva, was insulted by her father.

Satihood, the state of being a sati, should not be confused with 'suttee', the term used by the British to describe the practice, restricted to some among the highest castes, of forcibly burning widows along with their dead husbands. Accordingly, Molina has been a lifelong sati who has not burnt on the funeral pyre but inwardly and at her own hands. On the surface, she is meticulous in observing the anniversary of her husband's death. Indeed the man and his career are now, in the late 1980s, exciting media interest since his stories, posthumously published, have been turned into a very successful film. As Mahasweta Devi skilfully unravels Molina's true feelings, which have been covered over by her correct behaviour, we find here one variation on the theme of the true self breaking out of the shell of prescribed female ways of living. Whereas in *Mother of 1084*, published some fifteen years earlier in 1974, Sujata the central character is unaware of the existence of exploitation and oppression within political life, Molina in *Sati* is quite knowledgeable

about political and social realities. On account of her husband and his friends, she has seen many changes within and outside the communist movement, and is aware of the many injustices in Indian society, such as caste discrimination, domestic violence, economic hardship. Molina's conformist role has not been imposed upon her; it is a role she has chosen. In Gayatri Spivak terms, Molina exemplifies that 'internalised gendering',¹ which is women's complicity with feudal and patriarchal norms. Molina could have remarried – she was only 22 when her husband died – and there were men anxious to marry her. She could have disregarded her mother-in-law's rudeness and screaming abuse, and asked her, an uninvited guest, to leave. Molina did continue with her education after her husband died, she did train as a teacher, starting her own school and helping destitute women. On one level she is more liberated than Sujata and yet she is chained to traditional precepts of how a loyal wife should continue to show devotion and respect to a dead husband's memory. She defends her granddaughter who decides to separate from a possessive husband who will not let his wife follow a career; she is critical of her daughters' claims to be liberated – one is a successful academic – while adhering to conventional practices and values, such as dowries and wifely obedience. Yet she cannot bring herself to break loose from her own seemingly uncritical regard for her husband until she realizes that the physical ailments she has made light of, and a lifetime of denial, have brought her to the brink of death.

Mahasweta Devi (born in 1926) ranks among the great writers of modern India. Since her first novel, *Jhansir Rani* (1956) based on Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi who joined the 1857 Rebellion against the British, she has written more than a hundred works of fiction, some plays and books for children. She writes in Bengali, has been translated widely into the Indian regional languages but, so far, has had only a handful of stories and one novel translated into English. In 1997 she received the Jnanpith Award, India's highest literary prize, for her writings, which were described in the citation as 'important annals of the human struggle against injustice', and her 'admiration for those who raise their voice in protest'. Her fiction centres on tribal men and women who are denied the most basic of human rights, on bonded labourers, sharecroppers, landless workers and revolutionary activists from these classes or outside who fight for social change and justice. She chooses also for her characters historic figures like Lakshmibai, and Birsa Munda, the tribal leader who fought the British at the turn of the century. She sets her stories during actual movements of resistance, such as the sharecroppers' uprising known as the Tebhaga Movement in districts of East and West Bengal in 1946-1947, and the Naxalite Movement of rural and urban guerrilla struggle of the late 1960s and early 1970s. She says in an interview she gave in 1983: 'Once I became a professional writer, I felt increasingly that a writer should document his own time and history. The socio-economic

history of human development has always fascinated me.² The Naxalite Movement, in particular, has inspired some of her best works such as *Mother of 1084* and *Agnigarbha* (1978), a collection of three long stories of which 'Draupadi' translated by Spivak is the most generally known internationally.³ Mahasweta Devi, in her introduction to *Agnigarbha*, provides some insight into her own writing: 'A responsible writer, standing at a turning point in history, has to take a stand in defence of the exploited. Otherwise history would never forgive him. ... Hence I go on writing to the best of my abilities about the people, so that I can face myself without any sense of guilt or shame. For a writer faces his judgment in his lifetime and remains answerable.'⁴

Mahasweta Devi's writings about Indian tribal people have proceeded along with her active involvement in their struggles to obtain justice – seeking redress for the wrongs done to them, trying to stop further encroachment on their lands, campaigning for the various laws and constitutional provisions to be actually implemented. At times, she adopts a documentary style providing detailed information about wages, about state affirmative policies ostensibly laid down to help the disadvantaged but often ignored. In domestic narratives, like *Sati*, she is precise about dates, the ages of characters, and their spatial and social locations. However, such journalistic reportage is only part of her craft. Her social realism is not a simplistic, quasi-didactic exposé of some particular unlawful act or social ill. She creates characters that combine the specificities of their class, caste, gender and ethnic culture with individual personalities whose perceptions and actions transcend the typical, and produce resolutions of conflict which are not always victorious. If one borrows Lukács's categories of critical realism and socialist realism,⁵ Mahasweta Devi's writing reveals qualities from both categories. There is an authenticity of knowledge used with the irony and detachment of the critical realist as well as a perspective derived from the forces that are working for a just social order which she knows from the inside, for she is not neutral in the conflicts she portrays and is actively involved in tribal welfare and civil liberties. Her social vision, while it is not a socialist programme of any particular left-wing political party, looks to a future in which those who have been marginalized and oppressed will overthrow the forces and agencies that have kept them subordinate.

Mahasweta Devi's characters are described as 'subaltern' by those who follow the Subaltern Studies school of Indian historiography initiated by Ranajit Guha.⁶ Subalterns are the dispossessed – peasants, bonded labourers, tribals – who become insurgents and whose insurgency forms the central thrust in changing consciousness through the transition from colonialism to independence. In an exploration of Mahasweta Devi's story, Alakananda Bagchi finds the voice of Tudu, a tribal hero in the Naxalite uprising, to be that of the subaltern in contemporary India's many nationalisms.⁷ Mahasweta Devi herself, in her acceptance speech of

the Jnanpith Award on 28 March 1997, said:

And tribals are not the only marginalised people in the country. Such people, their life and their constant struggles for a better existence, their aspirations and anxieties, their victories as well as their defeats, are the subject-matter of my writings, and will continue to remain so.

Are middle class women, like Sujata in *Mother of 1084* and Molina in *Sati*, to be placed with the subalterns of history? Sujata, in particular, high caste, well educated, married to an affluent man, and with her own job in a bank, does not resemble the tribal and Dalit subaltern, except in her gendered subordination enforced by her husband, and in her political illiteracy which keeps her ignorant of what her son was fighting for, an ignorance she gradually relinquishes during her meetings with those who were more closely connected to the son's life. Molina may be viewed as a quasi-subaltern on account of the treatment she suffers at her mother-in-law's hands as well as her husband's male domination over her sexually and his demand that she should stop writing. However, Mahasweta Devi is an important writer precisely because she can widen her fictional canvas to portray not merely the subaltern but the oppositional class – the large and subdivided Indian bourgeoisie. Molina, unlike Sujata, comes from a lower rung of the middle class in respect of her caste origin as well as her father's business background. She differs from Sujata in her greater political understanding and has no illusions about her husband's treatment of her. Yet she remains tied to her internalized ideal of the loyal wife and chaste widow. Both she and Sujata, along with other middle class women portrayed in Mahasweta's Devi's city novels, must release themselves from their false values, transform their consciousness and make their subjectivity and behaviour cohere, to find individual fulfilment through a life of political awareness and action. That such a path may be difficult to achieve – and for both Sujata and Molina, the decisive moment comes when they are very ill – runs true to Mahasweta's unflinching depiction of the real world where the road to human betterment is full of stumbling blocks.

From *SATI*

Molina Mishra, waiting for a major operation for cancer, is given a tape-recorder by her granddaughter, Ama, so that she may record stories for Ama's child while lying on a hospital bed. What follows is a dramatic monologue, with Molina trying to explain her life to Ama. The narrative begins after she has recounted details of her brief married life of only four years in which she had three daughters, one born after the death of her husband, Bejoy Mishra, who contracted tuberculosis in a colonial jail in 1940. Molina was then only 22, and now, an old woman of 70, she must attempt to make Ama understand the contradiction between her

seemingly exemplary life as Bejoy's widow, a modern sati, and her own sense of waste, especially of her literary talent. While she has kept Bejoy's memory honoured as a revolutionary martyr, and enabled his reputation as a writer to become nationally known through getting his stories published after his death and made into films, she has also not forgotten his treatment of her, behaviour typical of patriarchal society and arising from personal jealousy. The monologue is both a confession and a balance evaluation of a life dutiful and moral on one level and futile on another.

Translating Mahasweta Devi's style is difficult. She combines literary diction with the demotic. She moves from the ironic to the lyrical. Above all, she creates intellectual and emotional depth through brevity and terseness, and in English translations some of that economy is lost.

He was then in jail. I had two infants in my arms and scarcely any time for work. His friends began to insist that I write. I said, writing for the school paper was one thing but to write stories? Sitesh said I could do everything but that I did not know this was the case myself.

I wrote 'Earth'. Sitesh had told me that peasants evicted from their land would take a handful of their old soil for their new place. In my story the evicted peasant was caught by the landlord's men and killed while stealing a bit of earth. He was a Muslim. His son picked up a bit of the soil from his father's grave for the foundation of the new home.

How could I have known that my story would receive such praise. Sitesh bought several copies of *Prabhat*. Then I wrote '*Dwiragaman*' (the ceremony which takes place when the young bride goes to her husband's house for the second time), about a girl who, married as a child, was making her return now that she was older. The mother-in-law took the fish, the utensils and household goods that the bride's family had given but refused to let the girl come in. The husband was going to be married again. If the girl wished to remain as a co-wife, she could. It was what happened to Shyama Auntie who used to teach us. That story, too, was published.

Bejoy had been given a week's parole for medical treatment. My stories had come out and were praised by Dayal Sahani in *Pradeep*. He had been able to get the very smell of the village and see in vivid colour the humiliations endured by the women of India.

Bejoy's angry expression is engraved on my heart. I can't remember any other Bejoy. Mother-in-law screams, 'You're dying in jail and your wife behaves like a slut.' And Bejoy is tearing up my stories and shouting, 'Who encouraged you to write? Why did you publish them? Did you get my permission? No, Molina, there can't be two writers in the same house.'

Ramlaldada, Banibabu, Mohitbabu, Sitesh, Ajit, Father, Nandababu, Ranajit were all there.

I was burning inside, reduced to ashes.

I said, 'You've been let out for medical treatment. Don't get so excited. You hadn't left any stories so Ranajit – Don't worry. I shan't write ever again. You'll remain the only writer.'

Bejoy, it was Bejoy who tore my stories up. I did not obey my husband's order like a sati and destroy my own stories.

That was the day I was really defeated by Bejoy. Hurt, and my pride wounded, I forsook Bejoy in my heart.

And that was the very time that there was the possibility of my becoming pregnant again.

Later Mother-in-law would scream and ask, why I could not let a consumptive husband alone, how I could remain full of life while sucking her son dry. And I did become pregnant. Ama, no one knows even today that when I discovered I was going to have Bijoyini, I wanted to kill myself. I left the house and went to Chaudhuri Pond. It was Sitesh who brought me back. I said that never again would I bear Bejoy's child. Sitesh reminded me the child to be born had committed no wrong and I must not commit suicide because of Bejoy. That was not the right path. I must live and find another way. There was another road to life.

And Sitesh? He had been right from the start. No, Ama, I didn't choose such a hard existence just to show Bejoy. It was duty, my sense of what ought to be done. No matter how insufferable his mother was, who would have looked after her? And my three daughters?

I passed my Intermediate, got a job in a new school in our area, did my Teacher's Training, was promoted to a higher grade. Was I going to organize my personal life in a different way?

After Sitesh went away that dream faded for ever. And I chose to hide myself behind a thousand and one rules. Wasted, a life wasted.

I thought of my daughters' future. They were able to go through school, college, university. Father died in 1968. He was able to see two of them married. Their marriages were arranged by Ajit and the others. Mother-in-law, who had not parted with one of her jewels to pay for her son's treatment, gave whatever she had to her two older granddaughters. Bijoyini chose her own husband. Father lived to see you and your brother.

After Sitesh had left, Mother-in-law realized that she could no longer hurt me. She survived father by another ten years. I did not exchange more than ten words with her.

Ama, you will wonder why I chose to lead such a bleak existence if I didn't want society's approval? Because I had no interest in myself. Now, when I look back, I can see the needless self-destruction. But gradually I've wanted that at least you should know the way I saw things. So I've filled three exercise books jotting down my experiences.

And getting your grandfather's books published? That same sense of duty.

Not a single day did I recognize any duty to myself. Not for a long time. Now, knowing that it might be cancer, I've found myself again. I thought my past had defeated me. I couldn't seem to be able to forget it. I didn't want anyone to find out why I'd destroyed myself bit by bit.

I was somebody's obedient and virtuous wife whose entire life had been to walk in the shadow of her husband's idealized image. I was no sati like Roop Kanwar. I kept on burning throughout my life. That's what will be remembered. Indeed, that's the explanation I gave myself.

Today I've realized that the past did not defeat me. I want to live. I want to let people know that I'm not really the way they see me. Why do I want to tell them? Because I now know how terrible are the sati's cremation fires that are kept suppressed.

Shyama Auntie was not to blame. She was only fifteen when her husband refused to accept her as his wife. She was uneducated and her family was not the kind to help her stand on her own feet and build a new life. She could barely remember the husband, but had to go on wearing her iron bangle and put vermilion in her parting as a married woman, until one day she was told that now she was a widow. She was no better than an unpaid domestic help in her family and went on slaving for them until she died. She would tell me that, had she gone out to work as a servant, she would at least have got paid and might have the money to go on a pilgrimage. Shyama Auntie became a sati burning on her pyre throughout her life.

When I started my own school I saw many like her – daughters, wives, mothers.

You can prevent the burning at the pyre of satis. But what of women like me who, out of wounded pride, or to maintain their husband's image, sacrifice their writing, acting, music, everything, to live in silence as faithful devotees. There are many such wives who have martyred themselves as satis.

Those women with children, who are abandoned by their husbands, who cannot earn a living, who get no help from their families or society, are forced to live like satis. They are alive yet burn. Such satis are countless.

Even educated people, known for their liberal attitudes, cherish the old culture of sati. Those who have praised me would not have liked me, had they known the whole truth. They would say that I was destroying Bejoy Mishra's image.

No, Ama, because you know what kind of a man he was, you mustn't belittle his creative work. Creativity shouldn't be judged according to a person's character. I've seen it in my life amongst all kinds of people. Just because one works for the Communist party or is a sympathizer, one

does not get rid of the traditional teachings about women: that women alone should be subjugated, that they should be punished for any wrong done. Society makes women bear the blame.

Also, the whole sati business continues to dominate women's minds even today. Women themselves are the cruellest towards other women. Your educated acquaintances, colleagues, mothers, aunts, would all have been more pleased with you, had you decided to remain with your husband, just as Indian women are shown in films.

Ama, this what I've written. I don't know what the doctors will discover. I want to live, I want to work ...

NOTES

Mahasweta Devi's works which have been translated into English are: *Five Plays*, trans. Samik Bandyopadhyay (1986; Calcutta: Seagull 1997); 'Draupadi' and 'Breast-Giver', trans. Gayatri C. Spivak, in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (London: Routledge, 1987); *Bashai Tudu*, trans. Samik Bandyopadhyay and Gayatri C. Spivak (Calcutta: Thema, 1990); *Mother of 1084* (the novel), trans. Samik Bandyopadhyay (Calcutta: Seagull, 1997). See also the stories, translated by Kalpana Bardhan, in *Of Women, Outcastes, Peasants and Rebels* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

1. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Imaginary Maps* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. xxvii-xxviii.
2. Quoted in Mahasweta Devi, *Five Plays*, translated from the Bengali by Samik Bandyopadhyay (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1986), pp. vii-viii.
3. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (London: Routledge, 1987), pp. 179-96.
4. Bandyopadhyay, p. ix.
5. Georg Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (London: Merlin, 1962).
6. See Spivak, *In Other Worlds*, pp. 197-268, for analysis of 'Stanyadayini' (Breast Giver) and 'Draupadi'.
7. See Alakandanda Bagchi, 'Conflicting Nationalisms: The Voice of the Subaltern in Mahasweta Devi's *Bashai Tudu*', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 15, Spring 1996, pp. 41-50.